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NRO, Monday, April 05, 2010

Racial Epithets and the Tea Partiers, cont'd. [Abigail Thernstrom]

Like Mark Steyn, I regard Rep. John Lewis as a true American hero. I'm not sure I would have had the courage to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965, to face Alabama state and local troopers willing to use electric cattle prods, nightsticks, and tear gas to suppress a peaceful voting-rights march. Not for the first time, Lewis ended up bloodied, with scars that have never entirely faded.

Undoubtedly, the psychological scars have not faded either; those were the formative years for Lewis, and he has clearly not been able to move past them entirely.

And thus I partially forgive him — but only him — when he is quick to see racism in an angry white crowd. Not a single one of his Congressional Black Caucus colleagues has the same excuse, and it was disgraceful (needless to say) for Nancy Pelosi to equate that brutal struggle to make good on basic constitutional rights with the sordid effort to pass a mess of a health-care law whose moral force did not even remotely resemble that of the great mid-1960s civil rights acts.

It was also disgraceful for congressional Democrats in the summer of 2006 to equate the voting-rights problems of today with those more than four decades ago. But the House Judiciary Committee did not hesitate to say, "Discrimination [in voting] today is more subtle than the visible methods used in 1965. However, the effects and results are the same" — a sentiment that almost all Democrats and Republicans, both terrified of the R-word, signed on to.

What will it take to persuade the political class to abandon its racism-is-still-everywhere picture? It remains a politically promising strategy; it certainly worked in 2006. But playing the race card may not be such a swift idea when it comes to tea partiers. A just-released Gallup poll found tea-party members to be quite representative demographically of the American public at large — the exception being blacks, who comprise only 6 percent of participants. But 6 percent is about half of the black population! A real surprise. Lewis, Pelosi, et al., take note.

Of course, if our fearless leaders were to admit that tea partiers are just ordinary Americans, quite representative of the population as a whole, they would be acknowledging an unpleasant truth: Congress was not carrying out the people's business in passing that wretched health-care bill.

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